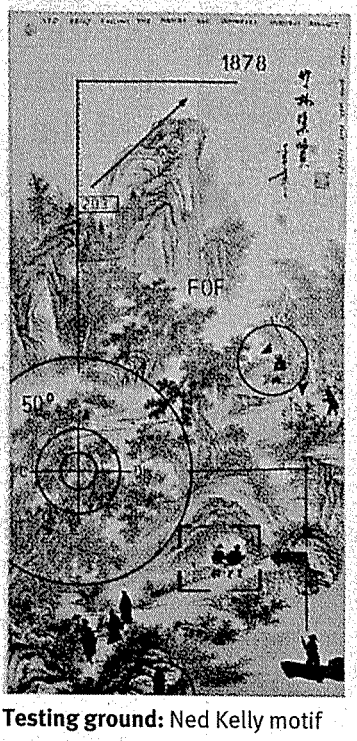
Guan Wei's politically charged art encodes lessons learned from his past, writes **Nicholas Jose**

Going, going, GUAN

FIFTEEN years after coming from China to Australia, Guan Wei has become one of this country's leading artists. His art has changed since we first met in Beijing in 1986, when he showed me paintings propped against the wall of his modest studio, small and grey canvases mostly, stretched on reused window frames. Three years later he accepted an invitation to the Tasmanian School of Art, seeking space to develop his art on his own terms and to nurture his highly individual engagement with the world.

Since then he has accumulated a recyclable store of images and styles that make his work instantly recognisable. His appealing signature motifs include animals, birds, botanical specimens, stamps, arrows, contours, acupuncture meridians and compass points (in English and Chinese), and his familiar humanoid protagonist, a shapeless figure, sometimes all mouth, sometimes one-eyed, whose gestures reveal a universe of dreams, anxieties and desires.

This month Guan Wei has major work in three group shows and a new solo show with Sherman Galleries in Sydney. In November his commission for 700 Collins Street in Melbourne Docklands will be unveiled. The 100sq m work is said to be Australia's biggest painting — twice the size of the John Olsen in the Sydney Opera House.



Testing ground: Ned Kelly motif

It's not the first time he has accepted a public commission: for the Sydney Olympics in 2000, Guan Wei produced a series of prints of ungainly athletes, euphoric in their determined powering towards gold. Much earlier, at Tiananmen in 1989 before taking the decision to move from Beijing, he made cartoon studies of the democracy demonstrators with their V-signs, blithely absorbed in the excitement of the moment.

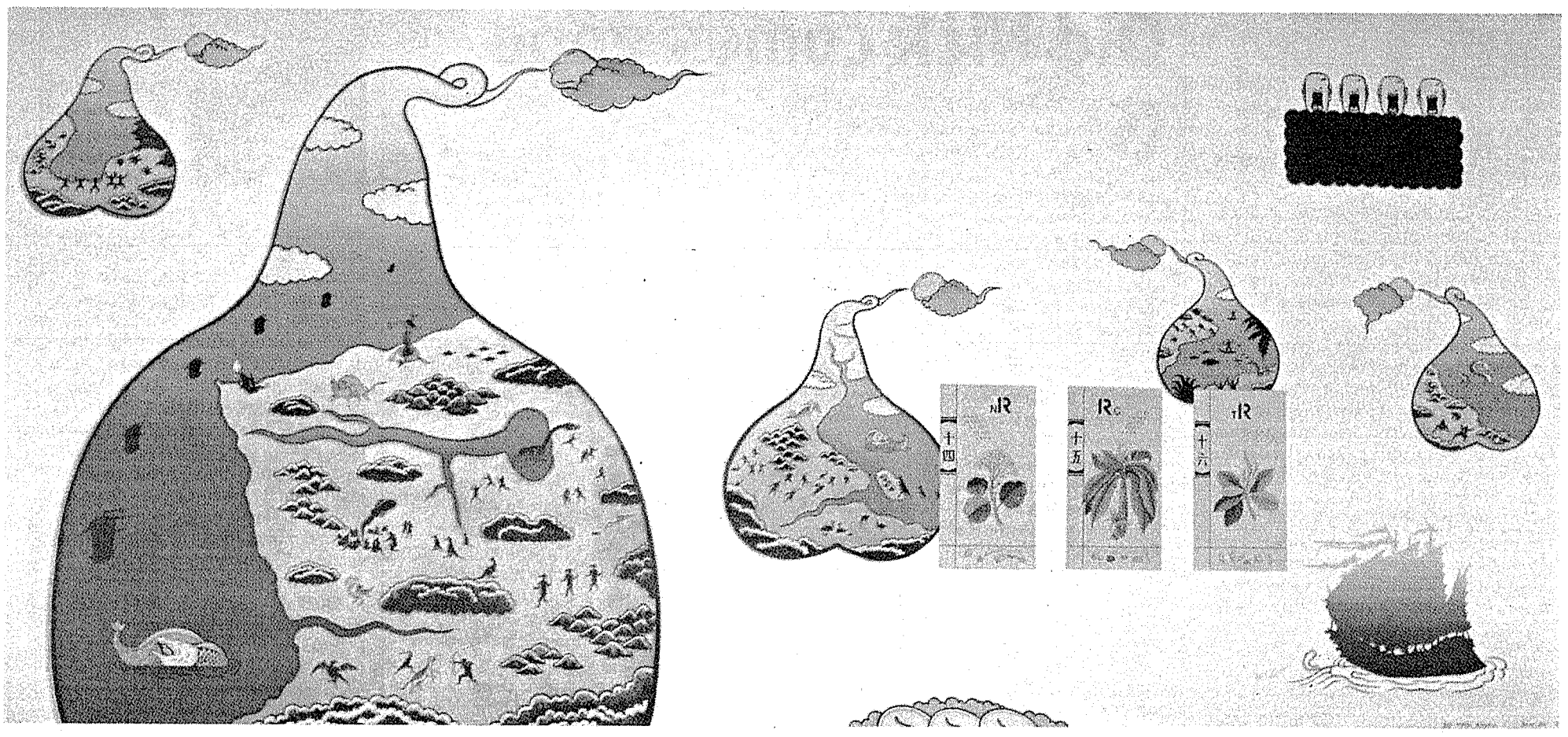
Guan Wei's own victories have been won over a longer time, in ongoing marathon journeys between China and Australia. In his recent work he reflects on the notion of borders and border protection that has so convulsed this country since the Tampa hove into view in August 2001. Maps, boats, islands, shores and a lot of water are recurrent themes, depicted in bright child-like blues. The national crisis becomes Guan Wei's personal story, approached with his characteristic whimsy, but also with the historical and philosophical overtones of an alternative way of looking.

Orientation in space according to the four cardinal points is a feature of Chinese culture. The Chinese invented the compass, after all. China, the Middle Kingdom, is the central country. Beijing, its seat of government, where Guan Wei was born in 1957, means northern capital. China's centred northern landmass is balanced by the archipelagos and waterways of seas to the south, including hazily distant Australia.

Guan Wei has made the archetypal migration from north to south and also, on a different set of bearings, from east to west. His painting for 700 Collins Street refers to the building's chief tenant, the Bureau of Meteorology, and is called *Feng Shui*, literally "wind and water". That is the Chinese practice of arranging directional flows of energy to achieve the best possible outcome, whether in your living room or your life. It's the science of north, south, east and west from a Chinese point of view. In that frame Australia's border protection may be bad feng shui, bad for the environment, Guan Wei obliquely suggests, taking a long perspective on the movement of people.

In a rich variety of sea and sky blues and auspicious reds, *Feng Shui* depicts an island shoreline vibrant with tropical fish and migratory birds. Through this space people ride the winds and currents on their journeys forward. The axis of the painting is the interrelationship of nature and humankind. The work's *Finding Nemo* brilliance and humour will likely have children goggle-eyed as they peer up from the foyer floor at the wondrous creatures of Guan Wei's marine vision.

The question of where a Chinese artist in contemporary Australia stands depends on changing frames of reference. Chinese culture is old compared to that of the West, yet a migrant from Beijing such as Guan Wei, who has settled in Sydney with his wife and small daughter, is a latecomer in the short history of European Australia. He's a later arrival still in a country whose indigenous culture has a duration that comfortably wraps around



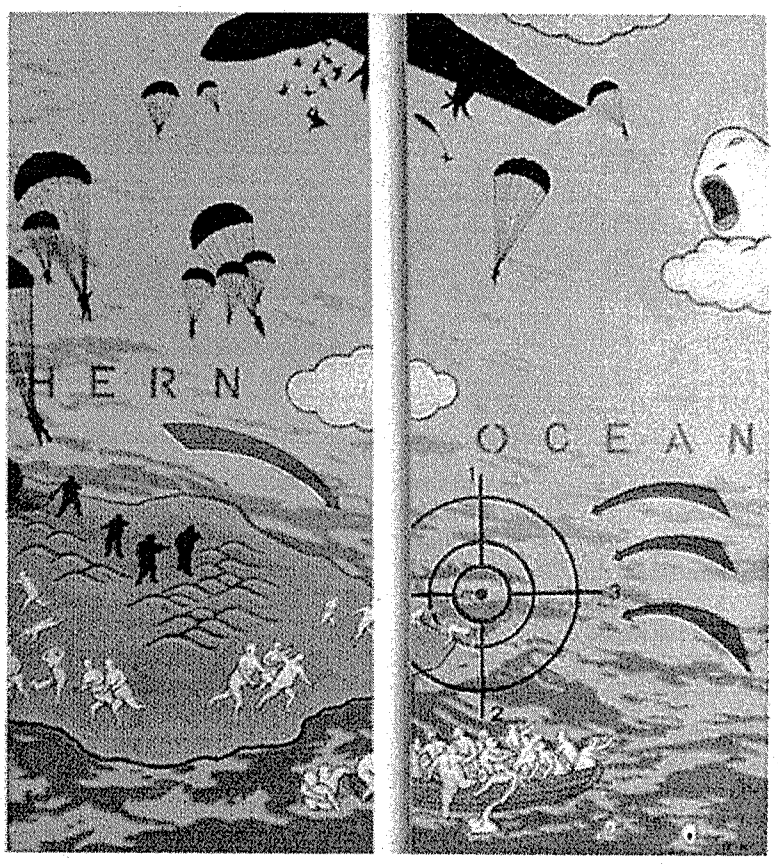
China's millennia. That elusive position on the map of history, geography and culture is where Guan Wei makes his art.

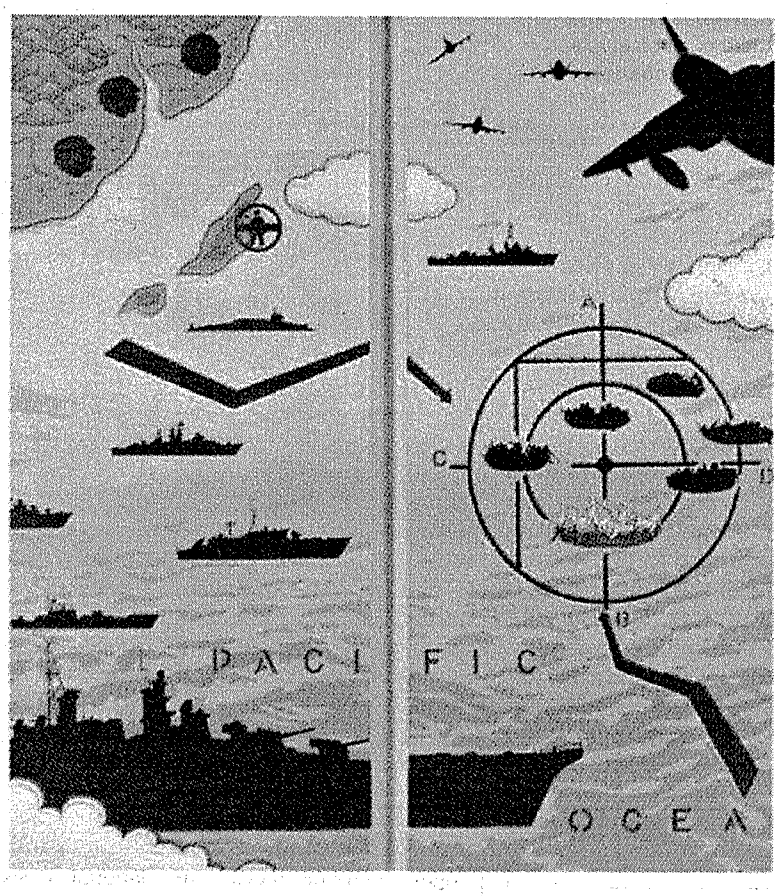
In Berlin last year, the artist painted directly on the wall for the first time, in two rooms of the Hamburger Bahnhof museum, to depict the dreams of people seeking to get to Australia and the fears of those imagining their approach. The work, *A Passage to Australia*, was painted out at the end of the show, as if to prove that dreams don't always come to pass. Last month, he painted *Home of Dream* on the wall of Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and *Big Mouse Kingdom* on the wall of Sydney's Ivan Dougherty Gallery. The Big Mouse is the kangaroo, as seen by an outsider (the Chinese word translates into "pouch mouse"). In willow-pattern Taoist dreams, children imagine the invasion of the Big Mouse's kingdom, Aboriginal Australia, which yields up its treasure of healing plants. The painting is a reference to the speculative discovery of Australia 600 years ago by China's great Ming dynasty admiral Zheng He.

These large, finely executed works are completed in a few days by Guan Wei and his assistants, who include his wife Liu Liwen. They outline fantastic narratives of water, boats and landfall and reflect issues of refuge-seeking, survival and human expansion in which we are all implicated. Unlike art for sale, they are not portable. They too will be painted out at the end of the exhibition. At once permanent, part of the place, and transient, they disappear like Aboriginal sand paintings or Tibetan mandalas with a reminder of the ephemeral nature of material things. In their vividly communicative storytelling, they recall the Tang dynasty Buddhist murals in the Dunhuang caves of Central Asia, painted 1200 years ago, where heavenly and hellish other worlds are brought into the space of this world to awaken our awareness.

Guan Wei is highly attuned to the interaction of art and place. "A certain kind of land produces a certain kind of people," he quotes, noting that "the grey tones of [my] time in Beijing have gradually changed into the bright blues and reds of the sky and earth of Australia". While painting remains the core of his work, he has constantly experimented with different contexts, producing series and grids in which repetition plays against overall composition, working on paper and with collage, adopting Chinese traditions of ink wash and fine brush painting, always paying attention to the installation environment.

His contribution to The Plot Thickens: Narratives in Australian Art, now at Victoria's Heidi Museum of Modern Art, inserts Ned Kelly as a paper-cut silhouette into classical Chinese landscape: Kelly follows the masses





Now you see it . . . Detail from Guan Wei's *Big Mouse Kingdom*, top, at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery until September 25 when the artist will paint it out; *Looking for Enemies No. 6*, above left, and *Looking for Enemies No. 1*, left, from his acrylic-on-canvas *Enemies* series, which 'responds to our khaki times with computer-game graphics starkly imposed on the natural features of land formations and waterways' and explores the notion of borders

'A certain kind of land produces a certain kind of people'

and immerses himself in them. "I see Australia as an enormous natural testing-ground," Guan Wei says.

In an interview last year with Melbourne-based Chinese writer Ouyang Yu, Guan Wei looked back on his formative years in Beijing when the post-Maoist generation was able to absorb "information from all directions": "We made a judgment that we should make a horizontal comparison with Europe and America by trying to get as much information as possible, and a vertical comparison with our old ancestors to see what they did. And there was a point where they intersected — and that's where we decided we should position ourselves."

He concludes that, having "gone through several decades of revolution, for us everything, fortunate or unfortunate, is combined and whatever we do has many layers".

Looking for Enemies, one of Guan Wei's new series for Sydney's Sherman Galleries, responds to our khaki times with computer-game graphics starkly superimposed on the natural features of land formations and waterways. One lot of heavily armoured beings target haplessly naked others who are scrambling ashore in spaces mapped as Christmas Island, Great Sandy Desert and Southern Ocean.

It's a wartime scenario of excessive forward defence that dreams up the enemies it needs to justify its adventures. The works remind us that Guan Wei's love of codes began as a private mode of dissent from the invasiveness of the Chinese communist state. It was his way of subverting the diagrammatic designs of propaganda. So too in these strong, urgent and mocking paintings. They are not only about border protection, Iraq, the war on terror, but more generally about the self-fulfilling prophecies of militarism.

"I have laid down three requirements for myself," says Guan Wei of his commitment to join the search for a new Australian discourse. "Wisdom, humour and knowledge. Perhaps [they] are truly the best passages to the heart of Australia." In *Looking for Enemies* he is wise enough and knowing enough to offer a timely warning laugh.

Guan Wei's work can be seen in The Plot Thickens: Narratives in Australian Art, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, until September 26; Cycle Tracks Will Abound in Utopia, ACCA, Southbank, Melbourne, until September 26; Terra Alterius: Land of Another, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW, until September 25. Looking for Enemies opens at Sherman Galleries, Sydney, on September 22 and runs until October 16.